DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 127 PS 015 740

AUTHOR Veerman, Philip E.
TITLE The Rights of the Child Today and in the Time of Janusz Korczak.
PUB DATE 20 Jun 85
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on the Training of Educators (Kibbutz Shefayim, Israel, June 20, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Child Advocacy; *Childhood Needs; *Childrens Rights; Global Approach; History; Participation; Social Change; *Social Influences; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Korczak (Janusz); United Nations

ABSTRACT

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child is a major achievement in the struggle to extend human rights to children. Its antecedents include the efforts of Dan Mulock Houwer, Eglantyne Jebb, Gustave Ador, and the work and words of Janusz Korczak (pioneer in residential care and director of an orphanage in Warsaw between 1912 and 1942), whose writings can be of great help in understanding children's emotional lives. Of historical importance is Korczak's fresh look at the concept of childhood in which the similarity of children, particularly adolescents, and adults is emphasized. In contrast, children today as a whole are seen as having unique characteristics. A broad historical view suggests that, whereas economic prosperity freed Western youth from the duty to participate as adults in society, but now Western youth, sometimes for economic reasons, are excluded completely from participation in society. Today many children and adolescents want to participate more in society on an equal basis with adults. For example, youth in Holland recently formulated a constitution for schools and presented it to the Minister of Education and Sciences. Currently, hopeful and terrible signs simultaneously indicate that the condition of the world's children is both improving and deteriorating. In view of the problems Africa's children face, more voices demanding children's rights must be heard. Three pages of references conclude the document. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED269127

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The Rights of the Child Today and in the Time of Janusz Korczak

by Dr. Philip E. Veerman

Amsterdam (Holland)

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dr. Philip E. Veerman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 015740

Paper presented at the International Conference on the Training of Educators in Kibbutz Shefayim, June 20, 1985

The Rights of the Child Today and in the Time of Janusz Korczak

Philip Veerman*

In 1978 a draft of a Convention on the Rights of the Child was presented by the government of Poland to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Once a definite text has been approved by the General Assembly it will become a "Convention", which each member state of the United Nations can ratify.

As you know, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was accepted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1959. Compared with the Convention, the Declaration can be seen as a formulation of the good intentions of the member States.

A Convention is more than a Declaration. Through ratification of a Convention countries bind themeselves.

This will be a major achievement, a landmark along the road to more respect for children. Along this road the words of Korczak (especially "The Child's Right to Respect", 1929) are today not an interesting "historical site", but of current interest.

Children's Rights Are Human Rights

We see that after times of oppression "rights of man" are formulated. One of the first of such Declarations was the French "Declaration de droit de l'homme et de citoyen".

---

*The author is a child welfare specialist, who graduated in January 1985 from the University of Amsterdam. He is now spending a year in Jerusalem, where he is collecting material about Korczak's orphanage in Warsaw (1912-1942) for his research project on Korczak as a pioneer in residential care. The project is sponsored by The Netherlands Organisation for the Advancement of Pure Research (Z.W.O.) and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture in New York.

In those days the rights of the child were not something that was a point of concern: it was, after all, the parents who were caring for their children and it was their concern. Children were in those days considered posessions of the parents.

The new dimension is probably due to democratization tendencies and the formalization of young persons "having a say" in the matter. For instance, a Dutch law says that children from 12 years and older have to be heard by the court if the court has to make decisions in which they are involved.

Good magistrates and local authorities in the past did consult children, but it is novel to have this practice obligated by law.

Children can now complain if they are not heard by the court. The philosophy of the Rights of the Child can not be seen separately fom Declarations and Conventions about human rights. It is an extention of human rights in the sense that children are now also seen as human beings with rights and not only as objects in care of adults.

From the Geneva Declaration to the Convention

I have called the Convention on the Rights of the Child a major achievement, but it should be mentioned here that the making of such a Convention is still a lengthy process to reach an agreed text. In principle, if there is political will for such a Convention to be adopted and open for ratification, the whole process, with discussions in the different bodies of the United Nations, will probably take from three to five years.

With so much talk about children in the United Nations, I cannot help but remember the cartoon-feature "The Rescuers" by Walt Disney Studios in which creatures even smaller than children (namely mice) play an important part. In the beginning of this film you see the delegates entering the United Nations building in New York. Not only do these delegates have their own entrance here, but also the mice have. A sign "mouse entrance" next to a small hole just above the pavement is then seen on the screen. You see the delegates of the Mouse Rescue Aid Society (which meets in the basement of the United Nations building) enter the building. Some of the delegates of the Mouse Rescue Aid Society look like delegates of African countries in colorful clothes, others look very western, like the mouse Bianca, who is dressed in the latest Paris fashions.

Disney's goal, when it came to animated cartoons, was to make "a caricature of life, rather than a caricature of individuals". As we know, many children liked the Disney

caricature of adult life. Maybe children liked these scenes so much because, as children, they identify with small animals.

Back in the real world of the United Nations we see that already in the spring of 1950 the Social Committee of the United Nations had before it a note from the Secretary-General containing a draft preamble and principles of a declaration of the rights of the child. It was interesting was that some Western countries thought at that time that such a Declaration was really made for the so-called underdeveloped countries, because they knew all about the interest of the child. Only during the last ten years has it been realized that, in the "developed countries" also, rights of children were violated.

In the field of child welfare it was Dan Mulock Houwer - secretary general of the International Union for Child Welfare between 1957 and 1968 - who introduced the material on child care into discussions of international organizations. In the International Union for Child Welfare itself, there was not much discussion about the rights of the child before Mulock Houwer's time. The major concern was helping the poorest children. It was philanthropy in the old meaning of the word.

Mentioning pioneers in the field of the rights of the child, we must mention Eglantyne Jebb, born in 1876 in Britain, who became the founder of the Save the Children Fund. In the atmosphere of post-World War I Britain, to give money to support so-called "enemy children" was considered ludiccrous. Bernard Shaw was for instance attacked for giving money for German children to the fund. He replyed ironically "I have no enemies under seven". It is interesting to see that today we have moved beyond this kind of thinking that helping hungry children of other peoples is "not done", even if these children are from so-called enemies or former enemies. The Draft of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a sign of this different thinking.

From 1919 until her death in 1928, Eglantyne Jebb devoted her time, energy and health to the Save the Children Fund and even more to the project of a Children's Charter. The rights of the child needed to be proclaimed, but first and foremost, the duties of adults toward children.

Eglantyne Jebb suggested that a short title needed to be proclaimed - "Declaration of Geneva" - followed by an explanatory preamble laying down the principles of the rights and duties. She had felt that the "cause of children must be acknowledged at the highest level (...) because it is they who pay the heaviest price for our short-sighted economic policies, our political blunders, our wars".

On November 24, 1923, the "Journal de Geneve" could report that on Wednesday evening, the 21st of November, their illustrious fellow citizen Gustave Ador had proclaimed the rights of the child from the radio station on the Eifel Tower in Paris.

At its plenary session on September 26, 1924, the Fifth Assembly of the League of Nations unanimously adopted a resolution in which the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (commonly known as the Declaration of Geneva) was endorsed and member-states were invited to be guided by its principles.

The tone of the Geneva Declaration was not Korczak's style. His style was more that of the "prayer of a pedagogue" (in his book ALONE WITH GOD) "Upright I make my demands, because I do not demand something for myself".

Korczak wrote about the Geneva Declaration in THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD TO RESPECT: "The preparations for the day of the attack is the labour of an army. Therefore the State takes care of housing the soldiers and feeding them. Soldiers are entitled to a uniform, weapons and payment; it is no alms, it is no charity! A child, on the other hand, has to beg his parents and the community; even now there is compulsory education. The authors of the Declaration of Geneva have mistaken duties for rights. The tone of this Declaration is persuasion, not one of making demands. The Declaration is only an appeal for good will, a request for more understanding".

Korczak's tone was unique in this period, but also his way of looking at things. Professor Lewin called that "une historiosophie unique dans son genre". He saw a world in which the adults had all the rights and "children live in slavery".

Korczak and the Rights of the Child

Declarations and Conventions about the Rights of the Child have certain dangers. As a Uniated States Supreme Court Judge puts it: "the 'rights of the child' is an abstract, general, legalistic concept. It is an idea, an ideal, at best an affirmation of principles. It does not help children until it is put into practice. If it is ignored, obstructed or prevented, it does no good. In fact it may do harm, because the words have been spoken, the condition of children's lives have changed. Rights without services are meaningless...."

Even if, as Mrs. Loewenstein-Freud said, "A late twentieth-century Moses would return from Mount Sinai and would include in his list of commandments the injunction to honor and respect our children" it is the practice that counts.

Korczak not only formulated rights for children who were neglected, but also tried to put principles into practice in his orphanage. Therefore, his books are far from abstract but can be of great help in understanding children emotionally. Korczak showed parents and educators how to see things through the eyes of children as, for instance, in his book WHEN I AM SMALL AGAIN where the principal character, who once was an adult, has been made into a child again through the magical powers of a dwarf.

Korczak showed parents and educators that laughing to scorn children can make a child feel enormously hurt. He also knew that children felt terribly hurt when they were not trusted by the adults or when their stories were not believed. Korczak's works are not only a plea for more rights but also a plea for empathy from parents and educators.

Korczak hated the depreciation of the feelings of children (their sorrow, anger, love, pride), their thoughts and their line of thinking which he believed was as serious as that of adults, only with less experience. When children did not want to express their thoughts - as adults often do too - their secrets should be as much respected as those of adults, Korczak wrote. There was also no respect for posessions of children, Korczak noticed.

He thought a lot about how to prevent the adults in his home from working in ways that would emphasize their authority and possibly be unjust to the vulnerable. He devised a written constitution, a "codex" of a thousand paragraphs, and a court for the orphanage. Adults and children were equal before the court in Dom Sierot. Weekly, the court of five children and a secretary (often an adult) was in session. The institution of the court and also of a Parliament ("Sejm") meant that in the orphanage not only the adults had the power to make the decisions. Korczak's belief in the dignity of man became the unifying philosophy. Korczak thought that if you treat children as respectable people, they will later be respectful. If you teach children to appreciate democracy they will later behave as responsible democratic citizens.

Although Korczak was an ardent pleader for children's rights it was clear to him that more rights should never lead to "an overdose of freedom" for children. A children's Parliament could also lead to chaos, is the warning in his book YOUNG KING MATTHIEW". Taking the responsibility is sometimes not easy for parents and modern professionals at the time it must be done. Korczak, of course, directed readers of his time. Many children in his day suffered from a too rigid and too punitive type of education. Nowadays, many children in Holland, and also in other countries like West Germany and England, suffer from a reverse kind of rearing -- namely, having things too much their own way. In my work with adolescents who play truant I saw that the walls of the

"holding environment" are often made too flexible for our modern youngsters.

In recent publications in Holland I see that Korczak is often misunderstood. He is presented as an anti-education figure. Korczak wanted more respect for the child as a human being, but not a free reign.

The Changing Concept of Childhood

When Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about childhood as a separate period in life, as in his EMILE published in 1762, this was a progressive and new concept. To keep children nowadays in a sort of quarantine before they are allowed to join the adults is not a progressive concept and does a lot of harm to many children. But from my work with children and adolescents I want to add that there are also many children who have, from an early age, had to take too much responsibility (parent the parents, for instance, instead of the other way around) and not once had the chance to ask for attention in a childish way. This experience prevents me from thinking only in generalizations, so the following conclusions do not apply to all children.

Zvi Kurzweil writes that "Korczak's writings occasionally evince a certain romantic strain. There are passages in his educational essays in which he calls children 'natural poets' and 'philosophers' and indulges in thoughts which can only be characterized as romantic in the highest degree".

This is still very much in accordance with the concept of childhood which was prevalent in his time. This romantic exaltation of childhood started to dominate poetry and painting around 1800 and was still present in Korczak's time. But just like artists, children were pushed out of the mainstream of society. Being a child of his time the romantic notions had affected Korczak also, but he was not just a romantic because his thoughts can stand on their own.

Kurzweil also concluded that romanticism "was not a dominanat characteristic in Korczak's work". In my opinion it is Korczak's fresh look at the concept of childhood that is of historical importance. "There are no children as such" wrote Korczak, " there are people who have different criteria, standards and experiences". Korczak "stresses again and again", wrote Kurzweil, " that the child and particularly the adolescent has the same basic traits, inclinations and feelings as the adult, but as it were, on a smaller scale.... He asserts that children are not essentially different from grown ups".

Aries in his famous book CENTURIES OF CHILDHOOD has explained that from the thirteenth century and most notably in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a new consciousness

emerged, at least among the prosperous middle and upper strata of society, of the specific nature of childhood. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment reinforced the emphasis upon the need for a lengthy period of education.

Dasberg wrote in her book THE ISLAND OF CHILDHOOD about this period of quarantine and about the influence of this idea of a "special period in time where children can mature together with their peers" till the present day.

There was a time, as Dasberg puts it, "when one could not escape adulthood". The economic circumstances made it later possible to take the load off the children's shoulders. There was no need for the child to run in the same tempo as the adults. This was first so for the children from higher circles but much later also for those from lower strata. Dasberg explains that when the children were freed from duties this became a norm in society; freeing from duties became more and more a form of exclusion from the duties of society. "Now the child did not have to be like the adults; the child was also not allowed to be as the adults".

Dasberg also gives a perspective for the children of today. A "real emancipation of children in society" is needed. I think that she is right: many children and expecially many adolescents want to participate more in society on an equal basis with adults. But just now, for instance, in the Netherlands the Government not long ago lowered the wages of working youth. For economic reasons we want these adolescents to stay on our created island of childhood.

Young people do not only want good intentions (as formulated in Declarations or Conventions) but also the policies have to show that their needs and wishes are taken seriously. We as adults have to change things, but our children will not wait passively till the adults have made the changes. A group of adolescents recently took the initiative in Holland to make a constitution for schools which they presented to the Minister of Education and Sciences. They proposed appeal-possibilities if the results of tests were not right and they made a plea for the same rules for teachers and pupils who arrive too late at school. Such a constitution for schools may also not be a bad idea for Israel where pupils do not yet have the right to see their own school records.

From my experience with children I do not advocate here that children have to fight everything. Even if the child is in the right, fighting for his or her rights is sometimes not advisable because he is in a weaker position. Later, if the child is in a better position, a fight might have better results. There are situations in which the consequences for the child will be too difficult. The thought "when I am an adult I will go my own way" gives some children hope that unjust situations will not last all their lives.

More People Have to Make Their Demands Known

There are many hopeful signs that their is some change for the better. The making of the convention about the Rights of the Child is such a sign. It is hopeful that in a world full of hatred, of nations against each other, such an issue can bring delegates of all nations around the table.

There are also terrible signs which show that children are not yet a top-priority of world leaders. Sixty-two years after the Declaration of Geneva stated that "the child that is hungry must be fed" the famine in Africa this year caused the death of 2 million people. According to the relief-coordinator of the United Nations, speaking in an interview recently, seven million children will probably die soon as a result of this famine.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs estimates "that there are 150.000 orphans in the country's 225 relief centers alone. Outside the centers and across the entire African drought belt there must be hundreds of thousands of parentless children. NEWSWEEK magazine recently concluded that no African government will have the resources to care for all those children. Many of them therefore will pour into towns and cities to scratch out a living as beggars or thieves. Isn't it time that all over the world people like Janusz Korczak stand up to make their demands known, not for themselves but for the children?

The author wishes to express his thanks to Mr. C. Roels of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hague, Holland; Mr. Ceri Hammond of the International Union for Child Welfare in Geneva, Switzerland; Ms. Jane Button of the Save the Children Fund in London, England; Ms. Prof. J.C. Hudig, former child magistrate in Rotterdam, Holland; and Mrs. Dr. Helen Rauch of the Children's Committee of the City of Jerusalem, Israel for their help in acquiring the necessary materials for this paper.

Literature

Aries, Philippe, Centuries of Childhood, Penguin, 1983.

Bettelheim, Bruno, in: Summerhill for and against, New York, 1970 Hart Publishing Comp.

Brown, Geoff, The Rescuers, in: Monthly Film Bulletin, August 1977, vol. 44 n 523.

Cantwell, Nigel, drafting a new convention 'rights of the

child' Children's Legal Center briefing, London, England.

Culhane, John, the last of the "nine old man", in Amnerican Film, June 1977, vol. II n8 p11.

Dasberg, Lea, Grootbrengen door kleinhouden als historisch verschijnsel, Meppel, 1975, boom Pres (english title "The Island of Childhood"; the book was not yet published in Engish).

Gortzen, Rene, Weg met de opvoeding, een keuze uit het werk van Janusz Korczak, E. von raunmuhl en Alice Miller, Amsterdam, Meppel, 1984.

Holt, John, Escape from Childhood, the Needs and Rights of Children New York, 1974, Dutton & Co.

International Children's Right Monitor, vol. 2., n 1, 1985, p 8-9. Interantional Union for Child Welfare, 50 years of I.U.C. W., special issue of the International Child Welfare Review, June 1970, n7.

Kohl, Herbert, respecting the serious thinking that children do, in: The Educaton Digest, March 1985, p 28-31.

Korczak, Janusz, Alleen met God, gebeden van een mens die niet bidt, Baarn, 1982, Ten Have (translation of "Alonf with God").

Korczak, Janusz, Das Recht des Kindes auf Achtung, in: Korczak das Kind lieben, ein Lesenbuch von Erich Dauzentoth und Adolf Hampel, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, suhrkamp Verlag.

Korczak, Janusz, Wenn Ich wieder klein bin, Gottingen, 1973 Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Korczak, Janusz, Hoe houd je van een kind, Utrecht, 1984, Bijleveld.

Kuijer, Guus, Het geminachte kind, Driehuizen, 1980, Synopsis.

Kurzweil, Zi, E., Korczak's educational writings and the Image of the Child. in: Jewish Education, vol 38 n 1 han. 1968, p 26.

Lampl-de Groot, J. Twee belevenissen: die van het kind en die van de volwassene, in: Isaac, Edersheim, E.H., et al., opstellen uit de kinderpsychiatrie, Deventer, 1975, Van Loghem Slaterus.

Lewin, Alexander, Systeme moderne de l'educ ation et le partimoine des pedagogues-novateurs: J.Korczak, A. Makarenko et c. Freinet, Vassovie, 1976, Institute des Recherches

Pedagfoigues Loewenstein-Freud, Sophie, Children without childhood, in: Jewish Spectator, winter 1984, p.33-36.

Postman, A., The Disappearance of Childhood, New York, 1982.

Piziali, Patricia Anne, A historical study of the origin and current status of child advocacy-concepts with particular attention to the contributions of Janusz Korczak, unpubl. diss. submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University 1981.

Sontgerath, A., Padagogik und Dichtung, Das Kind in der Literatur 20e Jahrhunderts, Stuttgart, 1967.

Sommerville, John, The Rise and Fall of Childhood, London, 1982, Sage Publ. Ltd.

Thane, Pat, Childhood in history, in: King, Michael, Childhood, Welfare and Justice in the legal and childcare systems, London, 1981, Batsford Academic and Educatonal Ltd.

Turner, J., Children not cattle, in New Society, London, 1978, Aug. 24, vol 45, n829, p402-03

United Nations, Human Rights, A compilation of International, New York, 1983.

United Nations, Yearbook 1950, p.597-598 (Draft Declaration of the Rights of the Child).

United Nations, Yearbook 1957, p.218-218 (Draft Declaration on Rights of the Child).

United Nations, Yearbook 1959, p.192 (Declaration of the Rights of the Child).

United Nations, Official Records of the General Assembly, Fourteeenth session, annexes, 15 September-13 Dec. 1959.

United Nations, Yearbook 1980, p. 869, (Draft Convention on the Rights of the Child).

United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Forty-first session, agenda item 13, March 11 1985, Report of the Working Group on a draft convention on the rights of the child, Chairman : Mr. A. Lopatka, March 11, 1985.

Veerman, Philip, Fighter for the rights of the child (Janusz Korczak still has much to teach as an educator), in: The Jerusalem Post, Friday June 14, 1985, p. 17.

Watson, Russel; Wilkinson, Ray (in Africa) and Greenberg,

Nikki (in Washington) in their article "We Are The Children", in :Newsweek, June 3, 1985, p. 18-28.

Weston, Burns, H.,Human Rights, in Human Rights Quarterly, vol.6., n. 3, August 1984, p. 257-280.

Wilson, Gillian, The white flame,in: World's Children, September, 1976, p. 6.

Winn, Marie, Children without childhood, New York, 1981, Pantheon.